

‘Perspectives on the Skills Shortage, the Role of Higher Education Institutions to Overcome this Shortage and the Possible Role of JIPSA’

**JIPSA-EC Council Meeting
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Introduction

Thank you for the invitation to share at this very important gathering some perspectives on the ‘skills shortage’, the role of universities in addressing this shortage and the possible role of JIPSA-EC.

In accordance with the invitation, I will confine myself to the role of universities. I am very mindful, however, that given our highly differentiated labour market the shortages in the quantity and quality of person-power that we must address require effective responses not only from universities but also the further education and training colleges and through various other education and training initiatives.

‘Skills shortage’

1. In speaking about the ‘skills shortage’, there is a need for very clear and focused thinking on what we are addressing.
 - First, it is seldom that skills alone are an issue and more often than not it is also knowledge and expertise (if not also attitudes). It is, therefore, perhaps most appropriate to approach the issue of ‘skills’ from the perspective of the particular configuration of knowledge, expertise and skills and attitudes that is needed.
 - Second, our labour market is highly differentiated and comprises of many different kinds of occupations and jobs. We must therefore distinguish between shortages at different levels of economic and social activity.
 - Finally, we must also distinguish between shortages of a *quantitative* nature and shortages that are *qualitative* in character.

2. As far as a *quantitative* shortage is concerned, this refers to the problem that there are more jobs that require the kinds of knowledge, expertise and skills that are produced by universities than there are people – high quality graduates - to undertake these jobs.
3. As far as a *qualitative* shortage is concerned, this can refer to two kinds of problems.
 - First, is that there are graduates that are being produced by universities who unfortunately lack certain kinds of knowledge, expertise and skills that are required for effectively and efficiently undertaking specific professions and jobs. It may also be that we are producing graduates that lack the values and attitudes that are appropriate for a constitutional, non-racial and non-sexist democracy that proclaims the upholding of the dignity of all. To the extent that such graduates find employment, the gain may be more in terms of private benefits for these individuals than public benefits for society.
 - Second, is that there are currently people in the private and public sectors, whether university graduates or not, who in varying ways and to differing degrees lack specific kinds of knowledge, expertise and skills that are required for effectively and efficiently undertaking professions and jobs.

In so far as the public sector is concerned, the existence of such people retards the building of a developmental state and also puts a brake on the capability of the state to promote economic and social development and discharge its constitutional and legal responsibilities.

4. With respect to the *quantitative* shortage in the *Eastern Cape*, there are five challenges:
 - First, is to ensure that we effectively identify the scope, size and nature of the high-level shortages that are being experienced by the public and private sectors.
 - Second, is to innovate creative strategies for a) addressing the immediate needs that exist, and for b) also ensuring that we simultaneously attend to medium- and long-term graduate person-power needs.

- Third, that we forge the necessary partnerships and mobilise the requisite resources for producing the (high quality) person-power needed by the public and private sectors.
- Fourth, to innovate appropriate mechanisms to put the graduates that we produce to work in the Eastern Cape.
- Fifth, is to have a long-term view as the quantitative shortages of high-level person-power cannot be solved by quick fixes but only through the production of graduates through high quality academic programmes, as well as by significant quality improvements in schooling.

5. Turning to the *qualitative* shortage in the *Eastern Cape*, there are four challenges:

- First, is to ensure that we effectively identify the nature of the lack of capabilities that may be experienced by people in employment, the key economic and social fields that this represents a pressing problem and the numbers in the public and private sectors that require support.
- Second, given that capabilities are not fixed but can be built and developed, we must devise creative strategies for effectively building the capabilities that are needed by the public and private sectors.
- Third, to the extent that our universities may be graduating students that lack certain kinds of knowledge, expertise and skills and possess inappropriate values and attitudes it is vital that we address this as a matter of urgency.
- Fourth, that we again forge the necessary partnerships and mobilise the resources for developing the capabilities needed by the public and private sectors.

The role of universities

6. As far as universities are concerned, it is not in question that our universities must contribute, as part of their social functions, to economic and social development and in this regard engage with the needs of our economy and society.

7. This includes both in the medium to long-term as well as in the immediate period the need to produce persons with the requisite knowledge, expertise and skills to enhance economic and social development, nationally and provincially and locally.
8. The production of the person-power that is needed can be and is undertaken by our universities through a combination of
 - Full-time undergraduate and postgraduate degree, diploma and certificate programmes
 - Part-time undergraduate and postgraduate degree, diploma and certificate programmes
 - Short courses which can be free-standing and seek to address specific needs, or can over time accumulate and culminate in degrees, diplomas or certificates.
9. In the medium to long-term and to effectively address our quantitative shortages it is high quality graduates produced through undergraduate and postgraduate degree, diploma and certificate programmes that are needed, especially as we become a more knowledge-based society.
10. In the short-term and especially to address the qualitative shortage of person-power, whether it is the under-preparedness of those who are in employment or of unemployed graduates, high quality short courses that are carefully tailored to address specific knowledge, expertise and skills needs are needed.
11. I have already noted that, however, it is not just universities that have a role to play in addressing the shortages that we are concerned with. In a differentiated labour market and in a context where educational institutions have different purposes and missions, the further education and training colleges and other education and training institutions also have a vital contribution to make in producing person-power, especially in relation to middle-level occupations and jobs. There is, of course, also scope for partnerships between some universities and FET colleges and other E&T institutions.

The role of JIPSA

12. What role does JIPSA have to play in addressing the immediate as well as medium and long-term person-power needs of the Eastern Cape?
13. First and foremost, JIPSA can and must provide leadership and champion an animating vision of the practical and concrete initiatives and interventions that are necessary for addressing the immediate and medium and long-term person-power needs of the Eastern Cape.
14. Second, it must serve as the vital and focused forum for identifying, prioritizing and pursuing the person-power needs of the Eastern Cape of a quantitative and qualitative nature.
15. Third, it must effectively assemble and hold together a wide range of key actors – business, provincial state departments, provincial government, trade unions and educational institutions – in common pursuit and endeavour around addressing person-power shortages.
16. Fourth, it must co-ordinate, encourage, facilitate and mobilize support and resources for joint and independent initiatives that creatively seek to address the quantitative and qualitative person-power shortages in key economic and social fields.
17. Fifth, it must serve as a catalyst for promoting the Eastern Cape business and public sectors as first choice employers and the Eastern Cape as a preferred place of residence.
18. Finally, JIPSA must help to overcome the obstacles and constraints that stand in the way of effectively developing the person-power required for economic and social development in the Eastern Cape.

Conclusion

Universities are required to play multiple and different roles, especially in a society such as ours which is in transition and must overcome underdevelopment , unequal development and the unacceptable economic and social legacies bequeathed to us by colonialism and apartheid.

Our responsiveness to society must be simultaneously economic, social and intellectual. On the one hand, we must engage with the economic and social challenges of our society, and contribute through knowledge and high quality graduates to economic and social development and the realization of equity, social justice and democracy. At the same time, we must serve a critical intellectual function and boldly 'speak truth to power'.

I am certain that I speak for all the VC's of universities when I say that we individually and collectively stand ready to contribute to the best of our capabilities, and that we look forward to JIPSA being an important forum for facilitating this.